

E-LEARNING: WHAT TO LOOK FOR AMID THE PANDEMIC

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic came as a major threat to the ecosystem of universities around the globe. Universities that were not ready or not familiar with online learning reacted and panicked while universities that were practicing online learning went through less reactive steps (El Dirani et al., 2020). Universities had to deal with financial burdens, information and communication technology (ICT) deficiencies and teaching and learning dilemmas. Though the top of the line academic concerns were achieving learning objectives, student competences and engagement. According to Rkein et al. (2020), educators, in their quest to provide quality education however remotely, they discovered that due to technical issues, classical examination tools cannot be deemed as authentic as before. Consequently, Universities were urged to search for and adopt alternative means to ensure the appropriateness, fairness, authenticity and quality of the learning process. Nevertheless, it is wise to define first what is online learning or e-learning. The term “e-learning” is used to define many areas such as virtual teaching, online teaching, web-based training, distance teaching, and distributed learning. In general, e-learning is defined as the utilization of technology to deliver learning materials using an electronic layout via the internet (Aljhani et al., 2018). Furthermore, the European learning communities define e-learning as “the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration” (Commission of the European Communities, 2002). In terms of knowledge acquisition, e-learning can be defined as “*the acquisition and use of knowledge distributed and facilitated by electronic means*” (Khan, 2005). Khoury et al. (2011), Clover (2017); Gupta (2017) justify e-learning based on previous success stories and accumulated experiences as follow:

1. Learning for all, especially for people living away from cities. It started as learning by correspondence before the industrial revolution and later on through learning by radio, learning by mail, learning by CD-ROM and other devices, Computer-based learning, Web-based learning, etc... Streamlining with technology development.
2. Training and development needs for corporations which needed to move people out of their work.
3. Continuous development of ICT and technology based learning.
4. Flexibility, affordability, working while learning, customized learning pace...
5. Cheaper and less costly.
6. Easier communication especially for students who have passive personalities and are able to show potential.
7. E-learning is highly systemized, objective, and based on learning outcomes. It offers real time evaluation and assessment.
8. Vast openness for resources [using Multimedia and hyperlinks] and open support to learners
9. Much flexible logistics [administrative work is self-contained in technology], for example, does not worry about attendance
10. Promotes independent learning, repetitiveness to access learning material, accessibility, scalability, consistency, effectiveness
11. High social responsibility towards the Natural environment [Green Application].

The above justification is valid and very challenging, especially to Higher Education Institutions (HEI), for the simple fact that university governance practices have to change to move from classical education to online education. Prof. Mohamed Zairi, UAE, international expert in total quality and excellence management, contends that HEI have to learn to adapt, make quick decisions, take balanced risks, reassign their purpose and rely on the ingenuity of the human will to find solutions (CLICKS, 2020).

Moreover, Khoury et al. (2011), Clover (2017), and Tamm (2019) identified several obstacles and challenges including: absence of good vision, lack of planning [lack of clear and precise project plan with all its requirements, rushing to e-learning, not sharing the decision to undertake e-learning with all stakeholders, no preparation of the staff and instructors, implementing e-learning and ignoring learning outcomes [knowledge and scientific], using of e-learning in all subjects [certain subjects cannot be achieved like mathematical subjects, practical engineering subjects, etc...], using ICT newest equipment and software without fitting the existing infrastructure, lack of stakeholders training, lack of specialized instructional design for courses, and deficient assessment techniques.

Information technology [IT] is considered an enabler to organizations of all kinds. And e-learning, as an integrated system, relies on a fully developed IT solution to consider many of the dimensions mentioned earlier as justification for online education. Indeed, e-learning is the use of electronic media and ICT in education, and is broadly inclusive of all forms of educational technology in learning and teaching (Adina-Petruta et al. 2015). But nevertheless, technical problems were identified by hundreds of HEI around the globe during the first semester of the pandemic, irrespective of the category of the country, and herein some examples (Clover, 2017; Tamm, 2019): 1. Electricity cuts, 2. Internet costs, 3. Internet continuity, 4. Internet capacity, 5. Technology availability to all stakeholders, 6. Wi-Fi availability, 7. 3-G or 4-G availability, 8. Old infrastructure, and 9. Security (among others).

COVID-19 pandemic brought huge challenges as well as opportunities to HEIs, however the challenge/threat that is common to all, is the “complexity and interweaving” (Prof. Ahmed Bawa, CEO, Universities South Africa cited in CLICKS, 2020) of different influences as discussed above, a fact that requires HEIs to create new approaches to governance and to fit the requirements of the new ongoing ecosystem characterized by strictly high safety and health measures and at the same time looking forward to keep delivering the deserved education for students at all levels. In fact, people issues are of high concern. According to Tamm (2019), concerns about instructors and students include, unpreparedness [psychological and mindsets], untrained in using the technology, authenticity in doing the work, Ethics and Plagiarism issues, and mental health and anxiety. Furthermore, as e-learning has many advantages, it also has disadvantages as shown in Table 1.

| Table 1 | |
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| Disadvantages | |
| 1. | Online student feedback is limited |
| 2. | E-Learning can cause social Isolation |
| 3. | E-Learning requires strong self-motivation and time management skills |
| 4. | Lack of communicational skill development in online students |
| 5. | Cheating prevention during online assessments is complicate |
| 6. | Online instructors tend to focus on theory rather than practice |
| 7. | E-Learning lacks face-to-face communication |
| 8. | E-Learning is limited to certain disciplines |
| 9. | Online learning is inaccessible to the computer illiterate population |

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| 10. | Lack of accreditation & quality assurance in online education |
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Source: (Tamm, 2019).

E-learning is here to stay, and based on the different deliberations ongoing worldwide in evaluating the previous experiences, the following recommendations are salient:

CANVAS (2020) recognized four recent trends shaping higher education provide actionable insights to aid HEIs' strategy to reimagine learning, including: • The explosion of online and remote learning options, • The need for engaging student experiences and personalized learning, • How immersive technologies will shape how we learn, and • Data-driven educational transformation.

Furthermore, Henry Stoeber, CEO, Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) in the USA (CLICKS, 2020), asserted that the new model of governance is not needed for HEIs to face the pandemic rather what is needed is new attitude, expectations and behavior toward stakeholders, HEIs must focus on the academic quality effectively and efficiently, and academic boards must step back and rethink their missions, and certainly the executive teams need to prioritize their core competencies. In addition, Prof. Zairi stressed that, HEIs must deal with its stakeholders (being students, faculty and staff) with compassion and empathy, and at the same time capitalize on human ingenuity, the practice of humanity, and enforce the spirit of collaboration and partnership (CLICKS, 2020).

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